

ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTION AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

**Animal Assisted Intervention and Social-Emotional Learning within an Elementary
Classroom**

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A Research Project

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies,

Concordia University of Edmonton

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Education

Concordia University of Edmonton

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Edmonton, Alberta

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my husband Matt for your patience and support over the last few years.

Thank you to my mom for always supporting me, believing in me, and pushing me to challenge myself.

Thank you to all my Concordia professors who have helped me become a better educator.

Thank you to my supervisor Christine Martineau for your guidance, knowledge, support, and encouragement.

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the effects of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) with a group of elementary students while learning five social-emotional skills. This research looked specifically at student attendance, overall engagement and learning retention during the social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons. I designed a program called PAWsitive Assisted Learning (PAL) which uses AAI to support students while they are learning SEL skills. These social-emotional lessons included: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship building. The AAI involved my certified wellness dog, Pongo. The study was conducted over seven weeks and included seven participants in my Grade five class. The research demonstrated that Pongo and AAI had a positive impact on both the learning environment and learning retention but no direct influence on student attendance.

Keywords: Animal Assisted Intervention; animal assisted wellness; animal assisted therapy; wellness; social-emotional learning; social-emotional skills

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Introduction

“I think dogs are the most amazing creatures; they give unconditional love. For me, they are the role model for being alive.”

— Gilda Radner (Big Think, 2014)

Throughout my life I have always been an animal lover and have felt the unconditional love that a dog can provide. I believe the most important part of my day is showing my students unconditional love and support. As educators, we know that many students come to school who struggle with trust, building relationships, and who have experienced trauma. Often, those students are seen as being difficult, disrespectful, attention seeking, problem starters, and time suckers, but as educators we need to ask ourselves: *what are these students trying to tell us?* What I have learned is that they are telling us they need our guidance and support, a safe place to be, and our unconditional love.

In my first year of teaching, I was constantly trying to figure out new strategies and tools to support my students and to engage them in social-emotional learning (SEL). I tried ideas from consultants, fellow teachers, and the internet. At times feeling defeated and at a loss of what to do, I would come home to where I was greeted by my three animals. Just walking in the door to their wagging tails, excited faces, continuous puppy kisses, and love made me wonder what would happen if I brought my dog to school. How would my students react? Could this be a meaningful support in my classroom? Could this provide my students with more guidance and support? Could it help me create an even safer place for all my students? It wasn't long after that I started training my puppy, Pongo, to become a wellness dog with Chimo Animal Assisted

Wellness and Learning Society (CAAWLS) in the hope that he would bring more unconditional love and support to my students.

After training Pongo and learning more about Animal Assisted Intervention, my idea that having a dog at school would be cool grew into me seeing how I could incorporate AAI to help support my students and make a difference in their educational journey. Once Pongo was certified and my principal approved his documentation, Pongo started attending school in 2020-2021. During this year, I didn't have a program set up or specific lessons to teach with Pongo. Instead, Pongo just came and interacted with students.

After having Pongo come to school the first year, I knew I wanted to make his visits more purposeful. I created a program called PAWsitve Assisted Learning (PAL) to meet the needs of my students in regards to supporting them with their social-emotional skills. PAL involves teaching and modeling the five social-emotional skills (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship building) while using Pongo as a support. This research project took place in Fall 2021 and involved my grade five students. When designing the PAL program I kept the learning needs of my grade five students in mind by making the program structured and consistent.

This qualitative action research study was conducted over seven weeks but data collection was only done for the five weeks of PAL lessons. Every week the PAL program focused on a different SEL skill and was supported with Pongo. Data was collected primarily through Google forms and observations. There were seven participants in this study. The findings of this study demonstrated that Animal Assisted Interventions and Pongo had a positive impact on learning retention and students' feelings of safety. This directly impacted the

classroom environment. Pongo and the Animal Assisted Intervention showed no increase in student attendance.

Research Aims

When thinking about the research I wanted to conduct with respect to Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) and the impacts it could have for students, I always found myself going back to two questions: What do my students need? What is the best way to implement AAI into a classroom? I am in my fifth year of teaching and have taught multiple grades. Every year I have realized that my students need support with social-emotional skills. There are students who come to school hungry, tired, frustrated, and not ready to learn. I have witnessed that, when students come to school dysregulated, it impacts their relationships, their ability to build trust and control their emotions, and their academic performance. When thinking of my first question, it became clear that what those students need is love, compassion, support and social-emotional skills. Social-emotional skills are foundational and they are critical for a student's educational journey and for their futures.

My teaching experience has taught me that social-emotional skills are essential and must be taught to all students. SEL skills must be taught even before an educator can start diving deep into curriculum. Curriculum is important and in my first year of teaching I felt overwhelmed trying to cram all the outcomes, skills, and knowledge into the school year. Being stressed about already being behind in September, I jam-packed my day with curriculum and didn't focus on social-emotional skills. During a science lesson I wanted to get my students into small groups to promote collaboration and communication. I taught my students how to work and act in small groups and gave them each a role but I didn't model how to collaborate or communicate respectfully. Many of those students didn't have the skills needed to respectfully collaborate or

communicate. Needless to say, these small groups did not go well. I had one student refuse to participate because their peers weren't listening, another student ripped their poster paper because they didn't like how they wrote the title, and a third student left the room due to being overwhelmed in their group. When reflecting on my lesson, I realized that I needed to take a step back and focus on social-emotional learning. After that, it didn't take me long to start focusing and looking for ways to support, model, and demonstrate social-emotional skills in my classroom.

If students struggle with social emotional skills, they are struggling with self-awareness and identifying their emotions, self-management, decision making and expected or unexpected behaviours, social awareness and reading emotions in others, and lastly, relationship skills and building friendships (Ashdown and Bernard, 2012). For example, if two students get into an argument at recess and struggle with recognizing and controlling their emotions, that trickles into the classroom and impacts their own and other students' learning, as well as the overall classroom environment. Effective teaching requires understanding the importance of social-emotional skills in the classroom because these skills are key to creating a safe and engaging classroom environment. All social-emotional skills are conducive to learning and without those skills teaching the curriculum becomes more challenging.

When thinking about how to implement AAI meaningfully into the classroom, I knew that I wanted to connect AAI and social-emotional skills. Social-emotional learning can be difficult for many students and I wanted to use AAI and my wellness dog Pongo to help students understand, acknowledge, and learn all five SEL skills. This is where I created a program called PAWsitive Assisted Learning (PAL). This program involves teaching the five social-emotional

skills (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills) through using my wellness dog Pongo and AAI.

Initially I had two questions that I wanted to explore in this study: *What do my students need?* and *What is the best way to implement AAI into a classroom?* In order to answer these two questions through an effective research design, I needed to explore the literature. Because there was a gap in the literature connecting AAI, wellness dogs, and teaching social-emotional skills, I explored the literature around social-emotional learning, Animal Assisted Interventions, attendance, and learning retention in turn and drew connections between them to provide context for this research study.

Exploring the Literature

Social-emotional learning is an important foundation for children's later success and well-being (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). The skills of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills help students feel more confident in building friendships, resolving conflict, coping with stress and frustrations, and managing emotions (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). Animal Assisted Intervention "is a goal-oriented intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education, and human service for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans" (Kim et al., 2015). This section examines AAI, SEL, and their impacts on student attendance and learning retention according to the literature reviewed.

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) includes five elements: a) self-awareness which is the ability to understand feelings, interests, and strengths; b) self-management which includes being able to control and monitor emotions; c) social awareness is understanding others' perspectives

and feelings; d) responsible decision making is the ability to make appropriate decisions for themselves and when interacting with others; and e) building and maintaining healthy relationships with others (Denham & Brown, 2010). Billy and Garríguez (2021) stated that by

incorporating the SEL perspective, teachers can not only help students set and achieve positive goals, but also help students understand how empathizing with others will allow them to establish and maintain positive relationships as well as aid them in making responsible decisions. (p. 9)

These five elements are the goals of SEL; achieving them requires the use of effective strategies.

There are numerous strategies and lessons an educator can find online by searching the term SEL, but “to be effective, SEL skill development and interventions should occur in a safe, caring, supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment - that is, an environment that supports students' development and lets them practise the skills they learn” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 138-139). It is important as educators we don't just ‘teach or tell’ our students about SEL; we must model these skills and implement well-designed and meaningful SEL programs because “well-designed, well-implemented SEL programs are associated with positive social, emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes for children and adolescents” (Jones & Bouffard, 2021, p. 3). Social-emotional learning

involves the processes by which people acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage their emotions, to feel and show empathy for others, to establish and achieve positive goals, to develop and maintain positive relationships, and to make responsible decisions. (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 139)

One social-emotional skill that impacts a student and the overall learning environment is the skill of self-regulation or controlling one's emotions. Veijalainen et al. (2019) explained that a

“child’s failure to acquire adaptive [self-regulation] skills leads to numerous difficulties in social competence and school adjustment” (p. 2). From my experience, these difficulties include being easily frustrated with academics, having a difficult time navigating and dealing with stressful situations, and lacking social skills which can lead to them being isolated from their peers.

There are proven benefits to implementing social-emotional learning into a classroom. Schonert-Reichl (2017) states that “they promote positive development and reduce problem behaviours, and that they improve students' academic performance, citizenship, and health-related behaviours” (p. 138). Teachers “are blessed every day with the opportunity to help change the course of someone’s life with our words, our actions, and our belief in their abilities” (Casas, 2017, p. 16). Social-emotional skills support educators in building and maintaining relationships with their students. Connection with students is very important because, “kids won’t learn from people who they think don’t like them. They will learn from your positive relationship with them, which is absolutely critical” (Carrington, 2019, p. 19). As educators it is our job to create “classrooms with warm teacher-child relationships [to] support learning and positive social and emotional development among students” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 137). When students are seen, heard, loved, and supported, everything else falls into place because “children who feel comfortable with their teachers and peers are more willing to grapple with challenging material and persist at difficult learning tasks” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 139). Social-emotional learning supports students behaviourally, emotionally, socially, and academically.

Animal Assisted Intervention

It is important to provide a working definition of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) because there are many forms of intervention. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (2022),

Animal Assisted Interventions is a broad term that is now commonly used to describe the utilization of various species of animals in diverse manners beneficial to humans. Animal assisted therapy, education, and activities are examples of types of Animal Assisted Intervention. (para. 4)

Animal Assisted Interventions are examples of “innovative program[s] that promotes growth by allowing participants to engage in prosocial behaviors that may generalize to other settings” (Kogan et al., 1999, p. 119). AAI programs are “a goal-directed intervention that utilizes the human-animal bond as an integral part of the treatment process” (Kogan et al., 1999, p. 106).

Animal Assisted Interventions can be broken down into three categories, according to Jones et al. (2019):

First, animal-assisted interventions (AAI) is the umbrella term that refers to the deliberate and meaningful inclusion of animals into human health, wellbeing, or educational interventions. Second, AAAs [Animal-assisted Activities] are less-formal interventions that aim to improve human wellbeing but are not necessarily individualised or documented. Goals may be general and applied to a wide range of target groups equally. Those delivering the intervention need not be licensed professionals but are still trained and/or certified to work safely together with the animal. Third, AAT [Animal-assisted Therapy] is a goal-directed and individualised treatment that is measured and

documented. AAT is delivered or directed by a qualified or licensed health/human-service professional, within the scope of their professional practice. (p. 2)

Regardless of the category employed, AAI can contribute to effective learning in the classroom.

Animal Assisted Intervention plays a positive role in providing students with meaningful experiences. Dewey (2004) asserted that “everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had” (p. 27) and a “child’s experience of education profoundly affects current health and wellbeing, as well as long-term health and social adjustment” (Evans-Whipp et al., 2017, p. 16). Casas (2017) stated that “students are inherently the most important people entering our school building” (p. 48) and it's important to find meaningful ways and experiences to support our students.

Dogs have been used over the years to support universities, hospitals, therapy sessions, and schools because “the dog, thanks to a long history of co-evolution, has developed a common communication system with humans. For its natural attitudes of openness, affection, curiosity and sociability, it has always been considered a facilitator within social relationships” (Dicé et al., 2017, p. 458). Lange et al. (2007) stated that “the first known documentation of utilizing an animal in counseling occurred over 40 years ago when child psychologist Boris Levinson (1997) took his dog, Jingles, to work one day” (p. 18). There are many “reports supporting the notion that pets, in general, have been successful at helping children learn valuable lessons in respect, responsibility, and empathy and have provided children with emotional stability through their accepting and ongoing interactions” (Terras & Olson, 2006, p. 35). Respect, responsibility, and empathy are all skills that are taught through SEL.

Using animals to support individuals in multiple ways is not a new concept. Friesen (2010) said that “research over the past 30 years indicates that therapy dogs [wellness dogs] may

offer physiological, emotional, social, and physical support for children” (p. 261) and that dogs provide “a unique form of support to children’s learning, physical health, and emotional well-being” (p. 265). Beetz (2013) found that dogs can “provide a calm atmosphere and are also used as rewards and motivators” (p. 2) and that the “presence of a dog, and in particular physical contact via stroking, can buffer and reduce the physiological stress reactions in response to a stressful, school-related task more effectively than the presence of a human” (p. 2). Animals, especially dogs, can provide a friendly and safe environment where individuals are supported emotionally, socially, physically, and physiologically (Beetz, 2013). There are many different skills that dogs can teach us. These include patience, kindness, openness, and forgiveness, which are important for students to have and related to social-emotional learning. Dogs “can provide assistance to children by helping them learn confidence, trust, responsibility, patience, and other skills that will help them in the future” (Boe, 2008, p. 26). An educator can use a wellness dog to teach and model important life skills.

The research behind both social-emotional learning and Animal Assisted Interventions state various benefits. SEL positively correlates with improved academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students. AAI and dogs can help students with their stress, help students build confidence and trust, and can support students' emotional health.

Student Attendance and Animal Assisted Interventions

Klink (2019) conducted a study that researched AAI and its impacts on students' anxiety and school attendance. Her study was completed with students who have disabilities. This study concluded that “student participants demonstrated an increase in attendance as a group. In the baseline phases, their mean attendance was 90% as compared to 96% in the intervention phases”

(Klink, 2019, p. 48). Klink's study shows that AAI had a positive impact on student attendance rates.

Kogan et al., (1999) explained that animal assisted therapy "has shown positive results in a number of school settings with different populations" (p. 106). Jones et al., (2019) did a review of numerous studies involving canine-assisted psychotherapy (CAP), which is an intervention "assisted by the intentional and meaningful inclusion of canines" (p. 3). This review provided qualitative data that showed how CAP increased attendance, communication, openness, and overall participation (Jones et al., 2019).

One specific study that Jones et al., (2019) reviewed showed a 100 percent attendance rate during the intervention involving a canine and their review "contributes preliminary evidence to support the inclusion of canines into mental health treatments for adolescents, to improve primary clinical symptoms, facilitate attendance, increase rapport and positive socialisation" (p. 19). The literature shows that Animal Assisted Interventions have proven to improve attendance rates.

Learning Retention

Learning retention is the transferring of new knowledge into one's long-term memory, this knowledge can be recalled in the future (Lorman Education Services, 2021). It is important for students to not only retain academic knowledge but to also retain knowledge on social-emotional skills. These skills will support students in all aspects of their lives. Beetz (2013) noted that "animals were used by students to calm themselves, to improve psychological wellbeing, and to contribute to enjoyment in the school setting" (p. 1). When students are happy and enjoy being at school this helps engage them in their learning and helps with the retaining of knowledge. Engagement and concentration help students retain the information and skills they

are being taught. Beetz (2013) stated that “overall, dogs seem to have the potential to positively affect social behavior, in particular aggression, concentration, and physiological stress reactions of children in school-settings or with respect to school-related tasks" (p. 3).

When students are focused on a task or engaged in their learning, they will be able to better understand and implement that knowledge or skill. Other research studies concluded that Animal Assisted Interventions allowed students to form a relationship with the animal involved which improved self-worth which ultimately led to less stress and frustration at school (Klink, 2019). Students won't learn when they are stressed and frustrated, meaning they will not retain information or skills being taught and modeled.

Research Framework and Design

My research design focused on answering one key question in relation to the benefits that AAI might provide for my students: *In what ways does AAI support student learning and retention of SEL skills through the implementation of PAWsitive Assisted Learning?* In order to answer this question, I designed my research to examine three areas of impact: classroom environment, student retention of learning, and overall student attendance.

Research Design

My research design employed a qualitative research methodology, action research, so that I could effectively solicit my participants' responses in their own words as well as include my own field observations as data. There are two types of action research: practical action research and participatory action research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For my study, I engaged with practical action research as it follows a systematic procedure that includes: identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and reflecting (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This design involves seeking to understand issues or situations in a person's workplace where they want to see a change (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and emphasizes the intent “to

improve, refine, reform, and problem-solve issues” (Clark et al., 2020, p. 15). Parsons et al. (2013) state that “we do research to learn about something that is important or of interest to us” (p. 7) and practical action research allowed me to look at my school context, reflect on what my students needed, and explore the impact of Animal Assisted Interventions.

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained that “having teachers study their own classroom problems and issues has emerged as an important direction for school renewal today” (p. 588). Clark et al. (2020) state that “action research is an approach to educational research that is commonly used by educational practitioners and professionals to examine, and ultimately improve, their pedagogy and practice” (p. 8). I chose to employ a qualitative action research framework because qualitative research includes “collecting data based on words or images from a small number of individuals so that the participants' views are obtained” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 16). Qualitative research worked best for my study because it involves a “researcher’s subjective reflexivity and bias” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 16). Going into this research, it was important to note my biases around the benefits of AAI and the importance of social-emotional learning. During this process I remained open to learning from the data collected.

Research Methods

My research was conducted in my grade five classroom over a seven-week period in late Fall, 2021. Pongo attended the classroom every Thursday during the seven weeks. The first two Thursdays were for introductory purposes. The data collection period included the remaining five Thursdays when the PAL lessons were implemented. In my study it is important to note that I am the teacher, researcher, and animal handler. I had to ensure I covered all my bases and did so ethically.

As the teacher I had to ensure that all my students were comfortable around dogs, and be aware of any animal allergies or previous traumatic experiences involving a dog. This was to make sure that all the students in my class felt safe having a dog in the classroom. Before introducing Pongo to the class, I obtained participation consent forms from all my students' families. I did this to inform families about Pongo and that he would be joining our class, to allow families to ask questions or express concerns, and to make sure I had permission for their child to interact with Pongo. This participation consent form was separate from the consent form needed to participate in my research. All students in my class were provided the opportunity to interact with Pongo and all families were required to sign a participation form whether their child would interact with Pongo or not. Every student in my grade five class submitted the participation consent form and was able to interact with Pongo.

Pongo is now a three-year-old purebred Dalmatian who is certified with Chimo Animal Assisted Wellness and Learning Society (CAAWLS). He has been certified for roughly two years with CAAWLS and has undergone extensive training. He has his required vaccinations, and completes a yearly health screening. Before Pongo could attend school, he needed his CAAWLS certification and approval from my district and principal.

As the researcher I reached out to all my students' families to see if they would be interested in participating in my research study. I did this by communicating with families through the Remind App, in person, or over the phone. I reiterated to all the families that their child would still be allowed to interact with Pongo whether they agreed to participate in my research or not. All families that were interested in participating in my research were contacted over the phone. I contacted them to explain the research to participate informed consent. I

wanted to highlight what the PAL program was, how I would collect my data, how their child's identity would be confidential, and how they could withdraw from the research at any time.

I had seven students and families willing to participate in this research. These families signed the research participant informed consent. There were six girls and one boy whose ages ranged from nine to ten. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, the students got to choose a dog breed as their pseudonym. The pseudonyms were Pitbull, French Bulldog, German Shepherd, Chihuahua, Black Lab, Husky, and Collie. None of the participants had allergies and, fortunately only one student had a previous traumatic experience involving a dog. The traumatic experience was from a neighbor's dogs continuously barking and jumping at the fence when the participant was outside. This information was critical to know because I was able to discuss this experience with the family and to ask the participant what their comfortability level was with Pongo coming into the room. Knowing this information, I was able to ensure the participant interacted with Pongo when they were ready, give them a safe place to go if they got scared or overwhelmed, and provide extra check-ins.

After all students returned the participation consent forms and my participants returned the research participation consent form, I introduced Pongo to the class twice before starting the PAWsitive Assisted Learning lessons. We called these 'Pongo Lessons' or 'PAL' for short. These two introduction days were to ensure that Pongo was comfortable in the classroom and that the students understood the expectations. Following those two introduction days, we were able to begin our PAL lessons.

Our lessons took place on Thursday mornings and Pongo was at school for an hour and fifteen minutes every Thursday. Pongo only attended school for this length of time because it is the maximum amount of time a wellness dog can volunteer according to CAAWLS and my

school district. This is to guarantee that the visits are productive and purposeful and to ensure the safety of Pongo and the students. Dogs can get over-stimulated so it is important to attend to their behaviours and cues. My training and previous experiences with Pongo in the classroom confirmed that 75 minutes is an optimal amount of time for maximizing the benefits and minimizing potential adverse outcomes for everyone, including Pongo.



Figure 1.1 Pongo

During Pongo's visits to my school, it was important to have procedures in place to ensure his safety and the safety of my students. All procedures and potential risks of participating in AAI were communicated with families and my administration prior to Pongo coming to school. These procedures included:

- setting up a kennel for emergencies or for when Pongo required a break;
- continuous supervision of Pongo in the classroom;
- Pongo remaining on his leash;
- teaching students how to act respectfully and respectfully around Pongo;
- having clear and consistent expectations, routines, and agreements while Pongo attends class;
- a separate space or room for students who are uncomfortable or frightened of dogs;

- teaching students proper handwashing techniques;
- addressing any allergies;
- addressing any previous trauma in regards to dogs; and
- maintaining open communication with parents, administration, and CAAWLS.

Data Collection

To collect my data on the impacts of PAWsitive Assisted Learning and AAI on the classroom environment, student retention of SEL skills, and overall attendance, I had my student participants complete two Google forms each week. One Google form was completed on Thursday and the second Google form was completed the following Tuesday. I involved the families of my participants by giving them an option to also complete a Google form and provide their feedback. The parent feedback form was voluntary and optional.

Each PAL lesson had a key area of SEL and a specific outcome related to that skill. Lesson one was on self-awareness, which focused on recognizing and naming emotions. Lesson two's skill was self-management, which looked at regulating and controlling emotions. Responsible decision making was lesson number three where we specifically looked at expected and unexpected behaviours. Social awareness was lesson number four with a focus on reading emotions in others and lastly, lesson number five focused on relationship skills and how to maintain healthy relationships. Thursdays were very routine and structured when going through each of these specific lessons.

Thursday schedule:

1. Pongo arrived at school and would greet the students at the door to say good morning.
2. Students came into the classroom, settled into their spots, and started silent reading.

3. Pongo and I would walk around the classroom and greet every student individually while they read.
4. After morning announcements, Pongo started to interact with students on the carpet and our Pongo lesson would begin.
5. Following the Pongo lesson the students would complete their activity and Google form.

During the PAWsitive Assisted Learning sessions, I explained to the students the SEL goal and provided guidance through the lesson and supported the students while creating connections between Pongo, themselves, and the SEL goal. During the lesson and discussion, students would engage with Pongo. They could pet him, sit with him, talk to him, and give him treats.

I collected data on Thursdays following the Pongo lesson and first thing in the morning on Tuesdays. The Google form on Tuesdays was to check for student retention of the social-emotional lesson. I chose the format of using a Google form because it allowed all students to use the speech-to-text and text reader functions. Both Thursdays and Tuesdays Google forms remained the same for all five lessons. On the Thursday Google form the goal was to figure out if the participants understood the focus of the PAL lesson, could name the SEL skill, explain their key learnings, and express why they thought the PAL lesson and that SEL skill was important.

The main focus of the Tuesday Google forms was to check for participant learning retention, see if the participants could recall and explain the previous PAL lesson and SEL skill, and to see how they felt when Pongo was at school. The parent feedback Google form was sent to participants' families every Thursday after school. This form was created for the families to complete with their child. The intent of the parent feedback questions was to involve the families

in their child's learning, see if their child understood and could explain the PAL lesson, and to see if they noticed any positive or negative changes in their child during the study.

Following the Thursday PAL lesson on the carpet, the students would go back to their desks with their Chromebook to complete the Google form. All students completed the Google form but only the participants' responses were included as data. The students had to submit the Google form before recess at 10:00 A.M. This allowed students to have as much time as they needed to provide detailed and complete answers. Students were allowed to use speech-to-text to answer the questions. When students completed their Google form, they would continue on with a task posted on the smartboard.

Students completed the Tuesday Google form first thing in the morning after they completed their morning routine tasks and listened to our whole school broadcast. I allowed students to take as much time as they needed to complete the form. When the students finished the Tuesday form, they would have a soft start to the morning. A soft start is where my class would choose something they wanted to do to get themselves ready to learn for the rest of the day. This could include talking with their friends, playing a board game, reading, or drawing. I purposefully took this time to slow down, spend time with my students, and ask students about their Google form responses. During this time students were using SEL skills without even knowing it. I would take time to acknowledge students who I caught using a SEL skill and I would initiate a short review on the SEL skills we had covered.

My research participants' families were invited to provide feedback during this study by completing a weekly Google form after school on Thursdays. I wanted to include parent/guardian feedback because “parents are the constant caregivers for their children and are in a unique position to provide expert opinion on their child’s participation and experience of

interventions” (London et al., 2020, p. 4493). To ensure the privacy and anonymization of data, students and their families were able to choose a dog breed as a pseudonym. It was also important to let families know that they could withdraw at any point throughout the research process, any data collected would be discarded, and that their child would still be able to interact with Pongo.

During my research I took extensive field notes during and after all the PAL lessons. These notes included observations on students' engagement, attitudes, and participation, listening to student comments and watching their body language when interacting with Pongo and during the PAL lessons, and a reflection on the whole class discussion revolving around the SEL skill. My field notes were included in the data analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

After collecting the data and listening to student feedback, I analyzed “the data for descriptions and themes using text analysis [to interpret] the larger meaning of the findings” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 16). My initial analysis involved looking at each student's answers to the questions on both the Thursday and Tuesday Google forms. I collected the data on a spreadsheet and had separate tabs for the Google forms. On those tabs I separated the questions and added the students' responses below each question. I created notes at the bottom of the spreadsheet for each student and wrote down key words and themes that started to emerge. This is the process of coding where it is key to use descriptors or keywords for what you observe (Parsons et al., 2013).

The second time I analyzed the data, I looked at each specific question and all student responses to that question, once again looking for recurring words and themes. I did this for every question on the Thursday and Tuesday Google forms. After finding key words and themes

that emerged from the data, I looked back at my research questions that revolved around classroom environment, student retention, and student attendance. After analyzing the data, I entered the interpretation phase of action research.

Interpretation includes “extending the analysis by raising questions, connecting findings to personal experiences, seeking the advice of critical friends, and contextualizing the findings in literature and theory” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 591). I did a thematic analysis that helped me interpret my data because, as Kigera and Varpio (2020) suggest, a “thematic analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for seeking to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviors across a data set” (p. 1). Furthermore, a “distinguishing feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility to be used within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks, and to be applied to a wide range of study questions, designs, and sample sizes” (ibid., p. 2). When interpreting the research data I found three emergent themes. As Kigera and Varpio (2020) explained, “themes are actively constructed patterns (or meanings) derived from a data set that answer a research question, as opposed to mere summaries or categorizations of codes” (p. 1). Those themes were classroom management, safety and happiness, and connection building.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include my personal bias towards the benefits of AAI and how I feel about dogs. It was important to acknowledge my biases when analyzing the data since I was the researcher, teacher, and animal handler in this study. It would be interesting to have my PAWsitive Assisted Learning program implemented by other teachers and animal handlers to see if they would get different responses and results. I believe having others implement PAL would provide a greater insight into the benefits of AAI. Another limitation of my research is that there was a small number of participants. I wonder what the research would demonstrate if the

PAWsitive Assisted Learning program were implemented in different grades and school contexts.

Outcomes and Findings

I thoroughly enjoyed teaching the PAL lessons and bringing Pongo into the classroom. The best part was the excitement on my students' faces every Thursday when they saw Pongo sitting outside the classroom door to greet them. When looking at the outcomes of this research, I analyzed my research questions on classroom environment, student retention, and student attendance. There were three themes that were related to the learning environment and those were classroom management, safety and happiness, and creating connections. Another theme that emerged was related to learning retention.

Learning Environment - *Classroom Management*

Pongo helped support me with my classroom management and in creating a positive learning environment where I could teach and model all five SEL skills through the PAL lessons. The first thing I noticed on Thursday mornings was how quickly my students listened and started their morning routine. They knew the routine of greeting Pongo at the door and continuing inside to start their silent reading. When Pongo was at school on Thursdays, I didn't have to provide a single reminder of what to do in the mornings or ask students to get into the classroom. This showed me that when Pongo was present that my students were more engaged in what they needed to do. The students were respectful and followed our classroom essential agreements. The students knew what was expected of them and they exceeded my expectations.

Pongo served as a motivator in the morning. He motivated students to take responsibility, start their learning tasks, and he helped students be mindful and calm when they entered the room. The students were also aware that the PAL lesson and interactions with Pongo would only

begin once they showed me they were ready. Pongo helped my students take responsibility for their learning on Thursdays and the students taking responsibility became more evident on days when Pongo wasn't at school.

Pongo supported our learning environment by supporting my teaching with engaging students to participate in the PAL lessons and learn the SEL skills. He aided students in persevering through the PAL learning activity where students would create a connection between Pongo and themselves in relation to the SEL skill of the week. The engagement of my students on Thursdays was incredible. Students were focused during the PAL lesson and I observed this by how they were watching Pongo, making eye contact with me, listening to their peers, sharing personal stories, and constantly raising their hands to answer questions or share an example connecting the SEL skill to Pongo. When students are engaged in their learning, they are more willing to try, take risks, and push through tasks they may find difficult. Overall, I saw student participation and engagement increase even on days when Pongo wasn't present.

Learning Environment - *Happiness and Safety*

When analyzing the Tuesday Google forms, five out of seven students mentioned at some point that Pongo made them feel safe. School should be a safe place for students and it's an educator and schools' job to ensure this. In my five years of teaching, I have always prioritized the safety and the wellbeing of my students. Table 1 displays the students' responses to Tuesday's Google form.

Participants	Comments
Pitbull	"I feel safe and I feel like Pongo is one of my truly nice friends."
French Bulldog	"I feel safe and I learn more about him and my classmates. It makes me

	feel like I'm not alone.”
German Shepherd	“I feel normal and happy.”
Chihuahua	“I feel happy.”
Black Lab	“I feel extremely happy, and safe.”
Husky	“Great. I just want to be with him and pet him and play with him.”
Collie	“Happy, Calm, Safe.”

Table 1.1 Happiness & Safety Responses

According to the data I collected, all students mentioned at least once that they felt happy when Pongo was at school. The participants enjoyed spending time with Pongo and learning alongside him. Often students would come up to me and ask me for Pongo to stay longer or for him to come to school more. The participant responses showed how Pongo made my students feel and how Pongo aided in creating a safe environment. I saw how Pongo made my students feel by watching them smile as they entered the room, giggle when they got to pet him or give him a treat, and become chatterboxes when sharing stories with me.

Learning Environment - Connection

Through observing and reflecting on the PAL lessons, I noticed that Pongo naturally created an environment of openness and acceptance. A positive learning environment helps students build connections with each other and their teacher. Table 2 displays the students' responses.

Participants	Comments
Pitbull	“I feel very happy and excited to see him whenever he comes to our school.”
French Bulldog	“I enjoyed Pongos company.” “I enjoyed the fact that Pongo was there with us. I wouldn't have liked it as much if he wasn't. He's one of the reasons I love coming to school on Thursdays.”
German Shepherd	“I enjoyed everything and nothing was bad.”
Chihuahua	“I enjoyed that Pongo was here today, and we talked about emotions.”
Black Lab	“I enjoyed working with Pongo on the carpet.”
Husky	“I enjoyed spending time with Pongo.”
Collie	“Did like feeding him treats.”

Table 1.2 Connection Responses

With Pongo at school, he was able to show the students patience, listening, and kindness. Pongo was used as a model to show the students about all five social-emotional skills. Pongo modeled these skills by giving the students handshakes and doing other tricks, sitting beside them, listening to their commands, and engaging with them calmly. As Pongo modeled these skills, the students engaged in conversations about how dogs are like humans. They created connections by talking about how dogs use the SEL skills daily and how humans use those same SEL skills. They were able to make connections on the similarities and differences between

humans and dogs. Additionally, conversations included numerous examples of using the SEL skills and the importance of them.

Learning Retention

When looking at the data collected, I noticed that students were inconsistent in being able to name the SEL skill, but they were all able to express what the concept was about in their own words every Thursday and Tuesday. This was the first time I introduced the five SEL skills to my class and believe that with more practice and exposure to the skills the students would have been able to identify the SEL name. Table 3 displays the students' responses.

Participants	Comments
Pitbull	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “We learned more ways we can make friends. We learned why we need to make friends. We learned the meaning of what a friend can truly be.” ● “We learned about some likely things that people could do, we learned about some unlikely things that we can do and we learned about what is right and what is wrong.”
French Bulldog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “It taught us how to manage our emotions and how dogs can help with mental and physical health.” ● “I learned that dogs feel the same emotions, how dogs are like therapists, and how different people/animals show feelings differently.”
German Shepherd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Self management, how to control anger and emotions and how

	<p>dogs can manage anger.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Building good relationships and healthy relationships with your friends.”
Chihuahua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “We talked about feelings and stress.” ● “How humans and dogs have the same emotions.”
Black Lab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “How to make responsible decisions, why we make decisions, and how pongo makes decisions.” ● “How we share emotions with dogs, how to control them, and how to understand them.”
Husky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “How people handle their feelings and know how to make you feel better, and what dogs do when they feel an emotion.” ● “What I can do when I'm feeling a feeling, what Pongo can do when he's feeling a feeling, and what and how I can do things to help me with my feelings.”
Collie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “How to control emotions. how pongo has emotions. Ways for us to calm down.” ● “How there are some ways to make friends and healthy relationships.”

Table 1.3 Learning Retention

It is important to note that the students being able to express their learning and understandings in their own words proves that the PAL lessons with Pongo were informative, educational, engaging, and meaningful.

Student Attendance

Through looking at the literature on AAI and reading about the positive impact dogs have for students, I expected that student attendance on Thursdays would increase. The data showed that there was no improvement in student attendance when Pongo attended school. Student attendance remained the same during the seven weeks. This makes me wonder if Pongo would have had an impact on student attendance if the research was conducted in a different school context or with different participants.

Parent/Guardian Feedback

The Google form for the parents/guardians was optional and they could respond every week or whenever they choose. Five out of seven participants' parents/guardians responded at some point to the Google form. The data from the Google forms showed positive feedback from parents/guardians that reinforces the findings on classroom environment and learning retention. Table 4 displays parent/guardian feedback.

Parents/Guardians of Participants	Comments
French Bulldog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[My child] always likes going to school but she seems more excited about Thursdays because Pongo is there.” ● “[My child] seems maybe more talkative about her day on days Pongo is there.”

Chihuahua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[My child] felt happy and calm while he was around Pongo and petting him” ● “More self confidence, less stress/anxiety especially around dogs and more responsibility.”
Black Lab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[My child] loves it. It’s fun seeing all of Pongo's emotions”. ● “[My child] loves it, she loves having interactions with him.”
Husky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[My child] is excited because owning a dog shows her how to take care of Leo. Learning how Pongo reacts to stress, this gives her an understanding on how to help him. Example, meeting new people.”
Collie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[My child] enjoys the engagement and feels good.” ● “[My child] has been in better moods and a bit more chatty.” ● “[My child] has been enjoying Pongo, she’s happier and more excited.”

Table 1.4 Parent/guardian Feedback

The parent/guardian feedback showed that the students were able to express what they learned during the SEL lesson and that their child enjoyed spending time with Pongo. No parents mentioned any negative impacts on their child during the PAL lessons and interactions with Pongo.

Key Learnings

My research has provided many insights into the effects AAI can have on students. The data collected from the PAWsitive Assisted Learning program I created had positive impacts on

the learning environment, specifically for classroom management, student feelings and safety, and on building connections. Other key findings included students being able to retain information and knowledge from the SEL lessons and how they enjoyed Pongo's company. When looking at student attendance the data showed there was no improvement during the five-week intervention.

Learning Environment

The first key finding is that AAI does support creating a positive learning environment. All educators must prioritize creating a welcoming and safe classroom environment. Building a positive classroom atmosphere should be prioritized when a new school year starts and should be maintained throughout the whole school year. The same can be said for SEL skills, these skills should be put into place, taught, and modeled. Through reflections and observations, Pongo and the PAL lessons supported me in creating a positive classroom environment, it impacted my classroom management, helped students feel safe and happy when at school, and supported connection building.

Classroom Management

When reflecting weekly on each PAL lesson, I found that AAI impacted my classroom management. Students were more ready to learn, focused, and on task when Pongo was at school. In order to teach the SEL skills, the students had to be ready to learn and respectful during the PAL lessons. Schonert-Reichl (2017) state that social-emotional learning "skill development and interventions should occur in a safe, caring, supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment" (p.138-139) and Casas (2017) expressed that what is "imperative to student achievement is the culture and atmosphere in which students learn" (Casas, 2017, p. 11). Classroom management and routines are needed to support students and their learning.

Casas (2017) asserted that, “[i]f we want kids to take responsibility for their own learning, we must provide an environment where their curiosity is nurtured and developed -- where they want to learn simply for the sake of learning” (p. 32). Thanks to Pongo, my class was simply ready to learn and they took responsibility and initiative during the PAL lessons and when completing the Google forms. Our classroom atmosphere was directly impacted by students being on task, respectful, and engaged. Those things led to minimal disruptions and distractions, less reminders to stay on task, and made learning more enjoyable for everyone.

Happiness and Safety

The second key finding was how Pongo made students feel while they were at school. Casas quoted Ferroni (2017) who contended that, “as educators, we know that so many students come to school for so much more than just an education” (p. 12). Students don’t just come to school to learn academics; they come to school to build relationships, learn about their talents, embrace their interests, and have fun. All of those things can’t be done if students are not happy and do not have a sense of security and safety when at school.

When students come to school, they should know they are welcome and that they are safe. If students don’t have a sense of security within the classroom their learning, behaviours, emotions, and attendance can be negatively impacted. Social-emotional skills help to create a welcoming learning environment because they teach students how to regulate their emotions, make decisions, and build healthy relationships. “Animal-assisted therapy allows participants to engage in prosocial behaviours that can be generalized to other areas of their lives” (Boe, 2008, p. 33), these skills are important inside and outside of the classroom. They make the learning environment more enjoyable, fun, and safe for everyone. Casas (2017) emphasizes that “we may not get to decide which kids to serve, but we do get to decide the kind of climate in which we

want to serve them” (p. 12). I want to serve all my students by creating a space where they feel comfortable, safe, and happy.

As an educator, I continuously try to grow and reach my students in different ways that exceed the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2018). The Alberta Teaching Quality Standard Competency 2(c) states that educators must build “capacity to support student success in inclusive, welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments” (ibid., p. 4). Pongo supported me in being able to create that environment for my students in a unique and meaningful way.

It is important to create a warm, welcoming, and caring environment for all students. When that is successfully implemented meaningfully and with purpose, students' learning, behaviours, and attitudes towards school will improve. It is an educator's job to provide students “a successful, rewarding, caring, and positive school experience for every student” (Casas, 2017, p. 17). When Pongo was at school, he supported me in providing my students with a caring and positive school experience. Since the students felt safe and happy when Pongo was at school, this transferred over to them being engaged in their work and them wanting to come to school. Casas (2017) believes that “every child deserves the opportunity to be a part of something great, and we must find ways to make an impact both individually and collectively” (p. 17). Pongo was a universal support for my classroom and provided my students with an opportunity that many students and schools don't have.

Connection

“If you want to have the most influence over a kid, as often as you can, give them your curious and undivided attention, first. And then you teach” - Jody Carrington, (2019, p. 25).

The data from the participants showed that they enjoyed interacting and learning with Pongo. Having Pongo attend school helped the students build relationships with each other and for me to build relationships with them. I believe that having a connection with one's students is extremely important. Building relationships with students is crucial before starting to teach curriculum. The same thing can be said for SEL skills. When social-emotional skills are taught and modeled for students, it helps a teacher create a positive classroom environment. Social-emotional learning provides students with the skills to control and regulate their emotions, make decisions, and build relationships with others.

Student-teacher relationships are important because students will not learn in an environment where they feel they are not cared for or loved. I prioritize relationships with my students and truly believe that building those relationships is the best part of being an educator and the best way to reach and support students. Rudasilla et al. (2010) said that “there is evidence that positive student–teacher relationships are connected to children's successful adjustment to school, academic achievement, and school liking” (p. 393). All students are different and we must learn about their interests, their strengths and areas of growth, and we must treat them all with dignity and respect. “Getting to know our students on a more personal level, such as their interests, fears, and talents is vital to creating a classroom culture where every child feels valued and understood...” (Casas, 2017, p. 27).

Building relationships for many students is difficult because they struggle with self-regulation. This impacts their ability to create and maintain relationships with others. Boe (2008) also states that “social connections are a key coping resource...In fact, a child’s self-esteem emerges through interactions with others (Boe, 2008, p. 26). As educators it is easy to fall into the ‘telling trap’ where you tell students information or tell them about strategies they can use

but “showing becomes the necessary component” (Carrington, 2019, p. 39). Spending time with our students and providing them with unique, engaging, and thoughtful experiences does help build connections in the classroom and Pongo helped support the building of those relationships.

Learning Retention

When looking at the data and comparing student responses from the Thursday Google forms to the Tuesday Google forms when checking for learning retention of the SEL skill and PAL lesson, I noticed that students were able to express their learning in their own words but were inconsistent with naming the SEL skill. Students consistently communicated good retention of the SEL skills which showed that they were motivated to participate and engaged while Pongo was at school. Pongo helped motivate students extrinsically and intrinsically throughout the intervention.

I enjoyed being able to set aside time and reflect on my teaching practices and the PAL lessons. I created these lessons with my specific class in mind and knew that this group of students needed activities and lessons that were more routine and predictable. In creating that PAWsitive Assisted Learning program this way, my students knew what to expect and really took responsibility for their learning. The students exceeded my expectations for completing their activities and for being respectful while Pongo attended school.

As an educator I want to ensure my students are supported and that their learning experiences are meaningful. When students are interested and engaged in their learning, I truly believe they will learn better and get more out of the lessons. Social-emotional learning is key because it provides students with skills they need at school and for their futures. Research shows that it's important to give attention to SEL skills because it supports students' social relationships and personal well-being at school and outside the classroom (Denham & Brown, 2010). When

making observations during the PAL lessons, I knew that I was providing students with the skills they would need throughout their educational journey and throughout their lives.

Student Attendance

The data did not demonstrate any correlation between student attendance and PAL, due in part to the fact that attendance in my class was not presenting as problematic prior to the study. This makes me wonder if AAI would have a greater impact in other school contexts, for example a program for students with exceptionalities or a trauma-informed program. Students did express they enjoyed when Pongo was at school and that they wanted him to come to school more often. Overall, Pongo and my PAWsitive Assisted Learning program were successful in teaching my students SEL skills and AAI has a positive effect on the learning environment and on student retention.

Parent/Guardian Feedback

The parent/guardian feedback from this study was all positive. I strongly believe that it is important to give our students' families a voice. It is not only important to listen and respect our students but also to listen and respect their families. By involving parents in their child's education, I am creating a better school community and building positive relationships with those families. Having positive relationships and mutual respect with my students' families has a direct impact on their child. This creates a connection between the home and school which benefits the child.

Next Steps

Throughout this research process, I have gained knowledge of action research, learned more about Animal Assisted Interventions and social-emotional skills. This process has allowed me to reflect on my own teaching practices and has made me think about my purpose as an

educator. My purpose as an educator is to make all students feel seen, heard, and loved. This action research has taught me many skills which I can bring forth into my classroom and that I will use one day when I enter the world of school leadership. All the skills and knowledge that I have gained have and will continue to help me achieve my purpose.

Even though the PAWsitive Assisted Learning program is highly effective in supporting students while learning SEL skills, I would modify the program by adding in children's literature to reinforce the SEL concept and help them build more connections. I would also add multiple activities that were differentiated for each SEL concept to provide students with a choice in how they demonstrate their understanding. I will continue to prioritize teaching these skills and providing my students with meaningful experiences that provoke their curiosity and wanting to learn.

As an animal handler and volunteer with CAAWLS, I will continue to train Pongo and involve Pongo in my classroom to support my students. I hope that my research will show other educators that it is possible to certify their own dogs and implement AAI purposefully into their classrooms as a tool for all students. Animal assisted wellness programs are commonly used in numerous settings and I would like to help the programs grow within my district.

My recommendations for future research in this area include taking the PAWsitive Assisted Learning program and implementing it in multiple school settings and at multiple grade levels. This research could also be done in a classroom where student attendance is a concern to see if AAI can increase student attendance. The PAWsitive Assisted Learning program could be implemented and further researched by organizations involving wellness dogs and AAI.

This research project has reiterated to me the importance of finding ways to support my students' learning and needs, how it's important to listen to our students and family's voices, and

how I must continue to be a reflective practitioner. My research also proves that dogs can provide meaningful engaging experiences for students and makes students feel happy and safe. Every school should be a place where students can be themselves, feel welcome and safe, and get their needs met.

Conclusion

This research project started with my wanting to make a difference in the lives of the students that I teach. I have always been an animal lover and when getting my puppy Pongo, I knew that I wanted to have him join me in my classroom. Such a simple idea turned into me using Pongo to support my students in teaching and modeling social-emotional skills. Those skills included self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship building. I took those SEL skills and created the program PAL where I used AAI to support me in teaching those foundational SEL skills.

When starting my research, I knew that I wanted to collect qualitative data to really have my students and family's voices be heard. I started my action research project by looking at two questions revolving around what support my students needed and how I could implement AAI meaningfully. This led to the focus questions of my research which involved looking especially at the impacts AAI could have on the classroom environment, learning retention, and overall student attendance. When looking at the literature for SEL and AAI, it stated many social, emotional, physical, and academic benefits for students. The data from my research showed positive improvements in the learning environment and for the students' retention of the SEL skills, but showed no improvement for student attendance.

Overall, this research project has taught me that I need to continue to listen to my students and look for ways to support them. It has reiterated the importance of teaching SEL

skills and has proven that AAI does have positive effects when implemented in a school. Moving forward, I will continue to educate myself, be a reflective practitioner, and contribute to my school community by using Animal Assisted Interventions to support students.

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Contact Details

Brianna Bertholet

Concordia University Email: brbennet@student.concordia.ab.ca

Appendix A: Pongo Information Letter

Pongo Information Letter

Dear Parents/Guardians,

This letter is to inform you that Pongo is a certified wellness dog!
Pongo will be joining our class this year!



Pongo is a medium sized dalmatian with short hair. Support dogs interact with people to offer feelings of wellbeing, to enhance communication and positive mental health through actual contact. His parents are purebred dalmatians. Pongo is 3 years old and has two brothers at home. Dexter the shih tzu and Arnold the orange cat! Pongo has completed multiple training classes and one tricks class (just for fun)! He is certified and insured with Chimo Animal Assisted Wellness and Learning Society (CAAWLS). His vaccinations are up-to-date and every year he completes a health screening. He is healthy and ready to come to school! There are procedures in place to ensure your child's safety. Students have a choice whether or not to participate in activities with Pongo and the amount of space between themselves and Pongo. The children and Pongo are under continuous supervision during all interactions.

Check out Caawls website: <https://www.caawls.org/>

Our class will have the unique opportunity to benefit from Animal Assisted Therapy. My goal is for Pongo to bring even more joy into our classroom and support student wellness.

What are the benefits of having a school dog?

Numerous research studies have shown the benefits of therapy dogs in schools. Therapy dogs have been working in schools for years.

Evidence indicates that benefits include:

- Cognitive – companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem-solving and game-playing
- Social – a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, encourages responsibility, wellbeing and focused interaction with others
- Emotional – a school dog improves self-esteem, acceptance from others and lifts mood, often provoking laughter and fun. Dogs can also teach compassion and respect for other living things as well as relieving anxiety.
- Physical – interaction with a furry friend reduces blood pressure, provides tactile stimulation, assists with pain management, gives motivation to move, walk and stimulates the senses
- Environmental – a dog in a school increases the sense of a family environment, with all of the above benefit continuing long after the school day is over.
- Reading – reading to dogs has been proven to help children develop literacy skills and build confidence, through both the calming effect the dog's presence has on children as well as the fact that a dog will listen to children read without being judgemental or critical. This comforting environment helps to nurture children's enthusiasm for reading and provides them with the confidence to read aloud.

<https://www.charactereducationtrust.org/2020/04/29/introducing-buddy-benefits-of-having-a-school-dog/>

Frequently Asked Questions:

What kinds of things will Pongo do at the school?

Pongo will be hanging out in our classroom. He will slowly get to know our building and get accustomed to the busy-ness of a school and meeting everyone. Pongo can participate in all kinds of activities and interactions such as being a study buddy, sitting with individual staff or students that need a break, reading beside students, going for walks with students, helping with supervision, and showing off his tricks!

I am allergic to dogs. How will the school ensure my safety/wellness?

Pongo has short hair. He will be cleaned before visits to the school. Pongo will be leashed at all times, so students or staff with allergies can avoid contact as necessary. Should Pongo be visiting a particular class, notice will be given in advance and

student allergies checked for that classroom. It is important to also wash your hands before and/or after interacting with Pongo to keep both parties healthy. The school is also thoroughly cleaned each day, so any dander should be limited.

I am afraid of dogs or have an aversion to dogs.

If you are uncomfortable around dogs, you will be able to choose to avoid or not interact with Pongo. Should Pongo be in an area of the building or in a classroom and you are uncomfortable, you just need to let a staff member know. Pongo is also the perfect dog to establish a new understanding / relationship with dogs if you would like to explore a new friendship.

Can we pet Pongo?

Yes. It is always important to ask permission of the handler/trainer before approaching or petting any animal. Approaching from the side or standing or sitting beside Pongo and letting him take the lead to say hello is preferred and is considered the most appropriate way to meet.

Can I give Pongo treats?

Yes. I will have treats for the students to give him. Pongo loves treats! He is on a specific diet! He is a vegetarian and his stomach gets easily upset if he has the wrong food. He likes fruit and veggie treats, carrots, apples, and peanut butter!

Permission to work with Pongo

- I give my child permission to work with Pongo at school.
- I do not give my child permission to work with Pongo at school.

Has your child had a traumatic experience with a dog or animal?
Yes/No. If yes, please explain.

Is your child allergic to dogs or animals? Yes/No. If yes, please explain.

Date: _____

Student name: _____

Parent/Guardian name: _____

Parent/Guardian signature: _____

Appendix B: Pongo Participation Form

Pongo Participation Form

Pongo will be joining our class this year!



- Pongo is a medium sized dalmatian.
- Pongo is 3 years old.
- He is a wellness dog. Wellness dogs interact with people and help them in many ways.
- Pongo loves kids, eating treats, and doing tricks.

- Yes, I want to interact with Pongo.
- No, I don't want to interact with Pongo.

Your Name

Date

Appendix C: Invitation & Informed Consent

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: Animal Assisted Therapy Benefits for Students
Researcher:

I am inviting you and your child to participate in my research study involving Animal Assisted Therapy. I am in my second year of my Masters of Education and want to learn more about the benefits therapy dogs can have on elementary students. My dog Pongo, is a certified therapy dog with Chimo Assisted Animal Wellness and Learning Society. I am asking for your child's participation in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and will include working alongside Pongo. I will be looking for how Pongo impacts students engagement and retention of Social-Emotional Lessons. This data will be collected through observations, as well as, student and parent responses on Google forms. Pongo will attend school once a week.

If you wish for you and your child to participate in this study, please read and sign the Research Participant Informed Consent. I will contact you in October once I have received the signed consent form.

Research Participant Informed Consent

Before agreeing to participate in this research, we strongly encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Concordia University of Edmonton.

Explanation of Procedures

This study is designed to examine the ways in which Animal Assisted Therapy can benefit students in class. I am conducting this study to learn more about this topic. I am the animal handler and teacher in this study. This research will be done over the course of five weeks, starting in September 2021.

Students will participate in five lessons based on Social-Emotional Skills (SEL). These skills include: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills. During these lessons students will use Pongo as a motivator and to bridge connections to the SEL skills. Interactions with Pongo include and are not limited to: reading with Pongo, petting and interacting with Pongo, and playing games with him.

I will collect data through taking notes based on observations and through student reflections completed on Google forms. Students will complete a Google form on the day of the lesson and on the following Tuesday.

Thursday schedule:

1. Pongo will arrive at school. He will greet students at the door to say good morning.
2. Students will come into the classroom and get settled into their spots. They will wait for morning announcements.
3. After the morning announcements, Pongo will start to interact with the students and the lessons will begin.
4. At the end of the day, students will be asked to complete a Google form.

I will invited you to voluntary participate in the study through a weekly Google Form. This Google Form will be sent to parents after school on Thursdays.

Risks and Discomforts

There are minor risks or discomforts that may arise as a result of your child's participation in the study. Pongo undergoes extensive testing and observation to receive his certification. This certification includes a temperament, obedience, and observation test. He is insured and certified through Chimo Assisted Animal Wellness and Learning Society (Caawls). Potential risks include: allergies, physical harm (scratch/bite), and discomfort through triggering traumatic experiences with dogs. These risks have been mitigated by hand washing, physical distance between student and Pongo, continuous supervision of Pongo and students, breaks throughout Pongo's visit, and an option for students to participate in activities. Pongo and I have been working with children in classrooms since September 2020. During this time there have been zero incidents. For further information please see Caawls Website:

<https://www.caawls.org/>

Benefits

The anticipated benefits of participation is the opportunity to utilize Animal Assisted Therapy to support your child's behaviourally, socially, emotionally, and academically at school. See the information letter to see some of the benefits of Animal Assisted Therapy for children in these areas.

Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in secure premises during this project. Only the researchers will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names included in the final report. Pseudonyms will be used instead. The results of the research will be published in the form of a research paper and may be published in a professional journal. It may also be published in book form. The knowledge obtained from this study will be of great value in guiding professionals to be more effective in supporting student needs with Animal Assisted Therapy.

Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your child during data collection and for a period of two weeks following the conclusion of data collection. The same process applies to students who wish to withdraw themselves as participants. All data will be discarded immediately upon request to withdraw.

Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask any questions during the study. If you have further questions, you are encouraged to use the contact information given on the next page.

If you have questions or concerns about the study please contact the Concordia University of Edmonton Research Ethics Board at reb@concordia.ab.ca

Please return signed form by **October 15th 2021**

Has your child had a traumatic experience with a dog or animal? Yes/No. If yes, please explain.

Is your child allergic to dogs or animals? Yes/No. If yes, please explain.

What is the best way to contact you regarding this study? (email or phone number)

What Pseudonym would you like your child to be referred to in the final report? Pick a dog breed:

Can I use PowerSchool to access your child's attendance records? Yes or No. _____

Can I use the information from your parent feedback form in my research? Yes or No. _____

I, _____ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information.

I freely agree for my child to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse or withdraw my child from this study. I understand that this data will be kept anonymous.

Participant Name

Date

Parent/Guardian Name

Signature

Appendix D: Thursday Google form

Thursday: PALS with Pongo Reflection

Tell me about your day.

Please include details, feelings, activities, and experiences.

Name: *

Short answer text

What was the focus of the PALS lesson with Pongo?

Long answer text

:::

Can you name three important things that you learned during this lesson?

Long answer text

In what ways, if any, did the PAL lesson with Pongo help you today?

Long answer text

Explain what you enjoyed or didn't enjoy about the PAL lesson with Pongo?

Long answer text

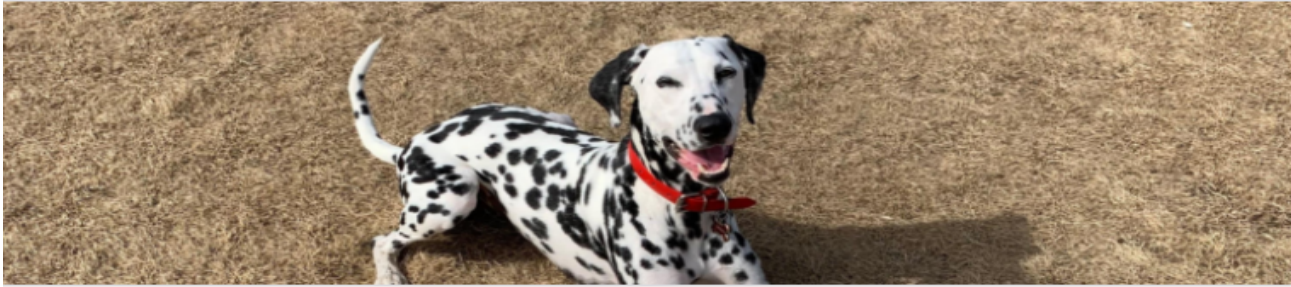
How did the PAL lesson with Pongo help you understand yourself and your feelings?

Long answer text

Why was the PAL lesson with Pongo an important lesson to learn?

Long answer text

Appendix E: Tuesday Google form



Tuesday: PAL with Pongo Reflection

Please include details, feelings, activities, and experiences.

Name: *

Short answer text

⋮

What was the focus of the PAL lesson with Pongo?

Long answer text

Can you name three important things that you learned during that lesson?

Long answer text

How can the PAL lesson with Pongo help you in school and outside of school?

Long answer text

How do you feel when Pongo is at school?

Long answer text

Appendix F: Parent Feedback Google form

Name: *

Short answer text

What did your child share with you today about our Pongo Lesson?

Long answer text

Has your child shared any stories or experiences that involve Pongo? Explain

Long answer text

How does your child feel about engaging in PAL lessons with Pongo? Explain/Give examples.

Long answer text

What behavioral, emotional, or social changes, if any, have you observed in your child as a result of participating in PAL lessons with Pongo? Explain/Give examples.

Long answer text

What benefits, if any, do you see as a result of your child participating in PAL lessons with Pongo? Explain/Give examples.

Long answer text

Have you observed any negative or detrimental effects as a result of your child participating in PAL lessons with Pongo?

Appendix G: Teacher Reflection Template

PAWsitve Assisted Learning© - Teacher Reflection

Date: Lesson Topic:

Notes:

Reflection:

Student Comments/Quotes: